



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Threat to Civil Society and Political Prisoners in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 19, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States would like to reiterate the deep concern which we expressed at the January 19 meeting of the Permanent Council about the threatened enforcement of ridiculous and unreasonable regulations in Belarus requiring public associations to have offices in either stand-alone buildings or with separate, exterior entrances.

Belarusian pro-democracy NGOs and political parties are, for the most part, unable to fulfill this requirement because the Government largely controls the limited commercial office sector available. Regrettably, the Government of Belarus uses this lever to hinder NGO activities and legal registration.

The United States understands that the deadline for meeting these housing regulations - if one might call them that - has been extended from February first to June first.

However, merely extending deadlines is insufficient when the legal framework for public associations is so fundamentally flawed - so fundamentally flawed - that it falls far short of OSCE commitments on freedom of assembly and speech, which the Government of Belarus has freely endorsed.

We therefore call upon the Government of Belarus to stop enacting and enforcing laws that undermine its own OSCE commitments. Invoking the rule of law to justify enforcement of such laws is a travesty and demonstrates a flagrant disregard for OSCE human dimension commitments and the underlying spirit and very purpose of the OSCE.

The United States reiterates its call to Belarusian officials to cease all harassment of civil society. We specifically call upon the Government of Belarus to desist immediately from requiring NGOs to meet the restrictive housing requirements in order to register legally. We again urge Belarus to work with the OSCE Office in Minsk and with ODIHR to develop a transparent legal framework that facilitates, rather than hampers, the work of NGOs and of political parties.

The United States also requests that the OSCE Office in Minsk continue to monitor this issue and to keep the Permanent Council fully informed.

Mr. Chairman, the United States is similarly concerned about the status of political prisoners in Belarus, including Mikhail Marinich, Alexander Vasilyev, Valery Levonevskiy and Yuri Bandazhevsky.

In light of the politically motivated charges and/or the legal proceedings against these men, we urge their release.

This is especially urgent in light of the health problems which are being experienced by Mr. Marinich and Mr. Vasilyev since their imprisonment.

The United States will monitor the case of former Member of Parliament Sergey Skrebets very closely in light of the implausible charges lodged against him; the Belarusian Government's previous legal harassment of this individual; and Belarus' track record of abusing the legal system to suppress opposition.

Skrebets was detained on May 15 for allegedly soliciting an individual to give a \$30,000 bribe to the Brest prosecutor's office to acquit another man charged with serious crimes.

Under the OSCE commitments that Belarus itself accepted in the 1989 Vienna Document, Skrebets has "the right to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time before an independent and impartial tribunal."

The United States hopes that Skrebets will not join the ranks of other political prisoners who are languishing and suffering in Belarusian jails because the Government of Belarus refuses to tolerate any dissent whatsoever.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.